



CHANGES OF TRADITIONAL BELIEFS IN CENTRAL EUROPE

2014



Pic of Our Lady (segment of the Holy Cross), Ašsko (Photo: Jaroslav Otčenášek 2012)

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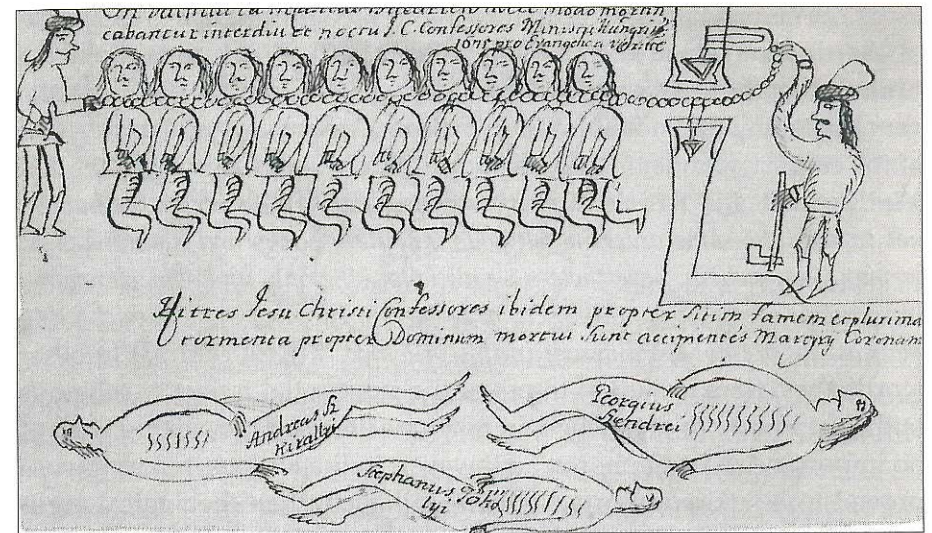
Prague 2014

Reconsideration of locality in the discourse concerning the renewal of Hungarian Calvinist identity

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'From the church of the priest to the church of the congregation' – One of the major changes encountered by communities with the emergence of the Reformation is summarised by Katalin Péter in that the church will go 'from the church of the priest to the church of the congregation' (Péter 2004: 78). The underlying cause behind the change is the conviction in the reformed ideology that the hallmarks of the true Church are the preaching the Gospel and serving sacraments, as well as practicing Church discipline and the so-called 'love-service'. The first two were determined by Calvin (see Calvin 2002: 621–639), the latter two were added by the Church's following the Helvetic confession of faith (see Schaff 1876: 408–411). However, all four hallmarks put an emphasis on the local communities in contrast to the hierarchic approach of the Roman Catholic faith: the Church is not in Rome, it is active here, amongst you.

Peasant ecclesioles – Beside the theological foundations, the principle of locality was further reinforced by the historical conditions of the Reformation period. On one hand Hungary has fallen into three distinct parts since the Reformation penetrated the country. Royal Hungary, the Ottoman Occupation and the Principedom of Transylvania were substantially different periods from the perspective of the Reformation taking root, while the Protestants were persecuted in the Habsburg parts, there were periods in the Principedom when the Calvinist faith had practically been adopted by the state as an established Church.



Picture 1: Hungarian protestant preachers condemned to galley-slavery, in the prison of Buccara (Dalmatia), 1674. Probably drawn by a survivor.¹

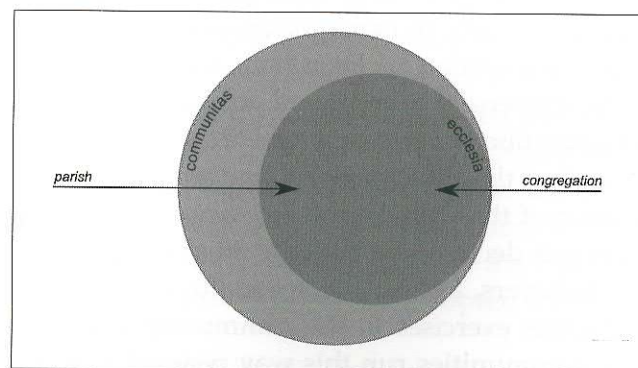
On the other hand, in the almost one hundred years following the expulsion of the Ottomans, the Hapsburg emperors conducted an institutional "counter- Reformation". It was of paramount importance to deprive Protestant communities of their spiritual and intellectual leaders, pastors and preachers. In many places this historical circumstance resulted in the assimilation of Protestant communities. However, in other locations, conversely, it triggered abandoned communities into taking the organisation of their religious life into their own hands. In addition to reading the Bible, singing and praying, the opportunity of the elucidation of the Holy Scripture was provided to all Calvinist followers. This was declared by the Reform teaching on the universal priesthood of believers, and such communities raised these forms of individual religious exercises to the community level. The technical literature calls communities run this way peasant ecclesiolas (Szigeti 1986). From these communities emerged the so called peasant prophets, and they became the hotbed of the propagation of Baptism, the Methodist Church or the Nazarene teachings.

Local varieties – Thus a number of local varieties were established for religious practices with different songs, prayers and liturgies – in other

¹ Source: S. Varga 2002.

words different kinds of preparations to recognise the manifestation of the transcendent (Korpics – P. Szilczl 2007). What, then, held the Church together? These differences prevailed in many cases from the very beginning of the Reformation process. Among its writs during one of the earliest synods in 1545 – which all Protestant Churches attended jointly – states in Article 10 for instance, that *“Even though we happen not to keep the same order in religious laudatory songs and hymns and in sermons everywhere, nevertheless we all follow the only and same ceremony in sciences, exemption and the service of sacraments, and even in celebrating the feast we are not too different in this province.”* (Kiss 1881:13) In other words they were united in terms of the substantial issues of religious faith, but a number of practices in religious life were considered to be of no importance – “adiaphoron”. However, in the long term these issues proved to be more important for the followers than theological argumentation, since for them they were the principal media of religion.

Communitas et Ecclesia – The locality principle was enforced in other dimensions of church life. Initially the concept of congregation was made up of two substantial elements: one of them being the civic community, or *communitas*, which was covered – more or less taking into account the chiasm in faiths – by the *ecclesia*, as a locality in the Appadurajian sense (Appaduraj 1996).



Picture 2: Diagram *Communitas and Ecclesia* 1.

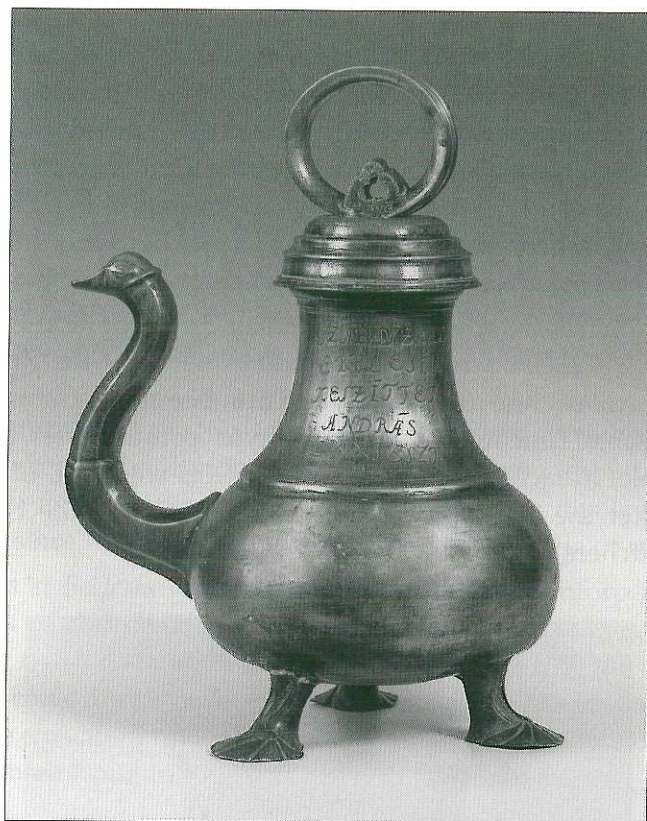
The order of the *communitas* and *ecclesia* mirrored each other in many cases. Presbyteries set up in the 18th century were frequently formed by the leaders of the community; the scope of authority was created to mirror that of the village magistrate and both the seating order in the

church and – in many places – in the churchyard were derived from the social structure (Csiszár 1985). Priests had no say to these arrangements. Being a Calvinist thus has become primarily a local identity, so much so that the terms “parish”, used to denominate the basic unit of organisation in the Church, and “congregation”, referring to a sacral community, both have become synonyms assuming the role and meaning of “local community”.

Heirlooms (clenodium) as symbols of identity – Heirlooms (treasures) of Calvinist parishes are special documents of connections between *communitas* and *ecclesia*. An important consequence of the Reformation was the radical decline in the types and number of objects which could be used in sacral functions by the “neophyte” communities. Not counting the Bible, in fact two such types of objects were left, objects used to administer the two sacraments – christening and the Holy Communion: pitchers, jugs, glasses and trays.



Picture 3: Communion cup made of pear wood, Hungary, 18th century.



Picture 4: Pitcher, made of tin. 1771, German.

These were accompanied by the so called paramentums (adornments), in other words the textiles offered by the devotees to cover the furnishing in the church.

These objects got into the possession of the ecclesia as donation from the advowee to a minor part and of followers from different social class to a major part, and sometimes it happened that the community acquired them on its own using public contributions and subscriptions (Szacsvey 2006). Unlike the Catholic practices the heirlooms of the Calvinist Church could be made of any kind of material: wood, earthenware, glass, tin, copper and certainly of silver or gold, eventually of coconut shells, which was seen as a speciality. The material often reflected the material culture of the community: in pot making centres or their surroundings earthenware heirlooms were frequently donated to the ecclesia (these were in many cases pieces of art in the guild or

equivalent; P. Szalay 1983). In a substantial number of cases the objects bore the name and monogram, and status in the community of the donor, the occasion of the donation, its date and time and eventually its relative date (for instance, at a given time who was curator or preacher), and in most of the cases a quote from the Bible which summarised the confession of the donor. There are cases however when these objects contain only monograms and abbreviations. In many cases a communion cup is taken care of by multiple generations of the same family. The first generation has it made of silver, the second has it gilded or – has added other silver objects to it – has it re-cast. These objects had their own unique lives. If they were originally made of metal and melted down in say a fire outbreak, they may be re-cast quite frequently with the words „by the grace of God” is on them including the date of the outbreak of the fire. In other words the object will symbolise this point on the faith of the community in Providence. More affluent ecclesia frequently donated clenodia to the poorer ones, and the fact of donation is recorded on the object itself, beside being put in the inventory books. Textiles have a similar fate. Fabrics are embroidered mostly by the women of the congregation – maybe by the wife of the patron or the Protestant consort of the reigning Prince – and they also hold the name, occasion and the text from the Bible representing the confession. Coverings are put to use – just like the heirlooms – on the occasion of a feast or holiday after having been presented publicly. In many places, table cloths are laid on the Lord’s Table on the occasion of the Holy Communion, or are arranged in separate „orders” and used alternately. If the fabrics woven with silver or golden threads were worn in places, the textile was burnt and the precious metal recovered, sold and the proceeds turned to the „benefit of the ecclesia”, noting – if known – from whom the cloth originated. Thus heirlooms and adornments are multiple symbols of identity. They represent the social and financial status of the donor and of his or her piety (religious life conduct), respectively, but at the same time they are also carriers of common memories. It can be said in a number of cases that they function as main means of communal accumulation, since it sometimes happened – mainly in the 18th century in more affluent communities – that superfluous, old or damaged precious metal clenodia are sold and the proceeds used to cover the needs of the ecclesia, for instance to build schools or renovate buildings. At the same time for a number of lower value objects prestige is provided by the fact that they carry local remembrance.

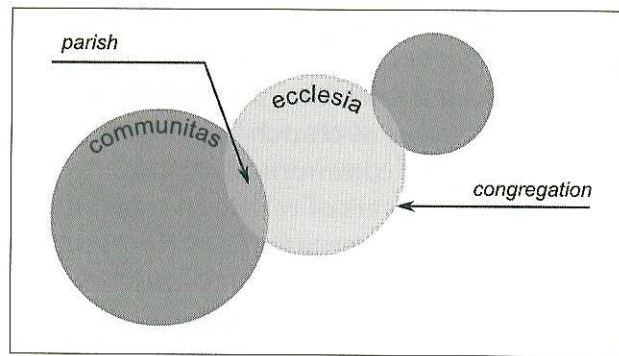
Fermentation (disintegration and unification) – However, the unity of ecclesia and communitas had started to disintegrate at the end of the 19th century. The process took place slowly and was not a predominant factor in its proportions for a long time, since for instance in the eastern and north-eastern parts of the country it only began during the Communist regime, particularly in the small village areas. However, the transition is now irrevocable. At least three additional factors must be highlighted in addition to the overall tendency of secularisation and laity (Nagy 2009).

- a) One factor was **migration** directed towards the central parts of the country, particularly the capital and the progressively growing agglomeration, which resulted in the establishment of socially and culturally diverse ecclesia with a high turnover of membership. Migration frequently affected persons living on the periphery of local society and hence, more loosely tied to local tradition, thus it cannot be a surprise that newly congregations formed in the metropolitan area differ substantially from the communities living in other parts of the country, and have a more dynamic relationship with denominational traditions as a community (Kósa 2006: 14–16).
- b) The second factor includes an attempt to bring about **unity** within the Church. An organisationally uniform Calvinist Church can first be seen after the Debrecen Synod of 1881, but a genuinely operational unity was only formed by the first years of the 20th century and lasted merely twenty years. Unification attempts among the Calvinists were formulated in response to some external compulsion and less due to internal necessity. Thus it seemed to be clear in the course of the religious policy struggles at the end of the 19th century that only a uniform Calvinist Church can survive which is declared – and last but not least to negotiate in – unity vis-à-vis Catholicism. At the same time, as a result of the more standard regulation of the organisational structure and operationing of the Church, distinctions stressed specificity and peculiarity of each part of the Church and locality. Also, the centralisation efforts entailed by the unification of the organisation – accomplished by the end of the episcopal activity of László Ravasz between the two World Wars, balancing between the historically and theologically unavoidable locality and practically inevitable centralisation – generated a conscious formulation of the locality principle and a determined position taken in favour of it.

- c) Finally the impact of the **Communist dictatorship** was an important factor. The regime tried to isolate the Church, excluding it from public spaces and enclosing it between church walls. This goal was the elimination of church organisations, associations, the narrowing down of communication channels, the removal of the middle and top levels of religious leadership and replacing it with “cadre” priests serving the political regime. The new leaders intended to centralise the Church by strengthening the Episcopal Church governance system – in the radical steps commenced by Ravasz – where executive power controlled all church activities largely through them. In an indirect manner however, this still reinforced the survival of the priority of the territorial organisation of the church. Namely, if anything substantial might have happened in the church in opposition to the centralised ecclesial spaces determined by the political power, it could happen only locally. Thus congregations occasionally became a true ground of ‘second publicity’ of the church and the other way round: the spaces of secondary publicity, existing, albeit very vaguely, in the church could only be organised only on the base of parishes. (Kiss 2006.)

From political transition to model transition – A significant part of the Calvinist population lived in rural areas up to the 1990-s. The situation changed by the turn of the millennium. The underlying causes include multiple factors: migration from villages to cities and the central part of the country, the gradual propagation of postmodern religiousness, and the ever more striking dispersion of the Calvinist church. Along these trajectories the distance between individual regional identities would grow and the former model of ecclesia was eroded more and more decisively:

- d) Connections with the civic community wereweakened and both the age structure and social composition become unbalanced.
- e) The role of communities tied only loosely to the territorial base or being completely independent would gradually grow stronger (see Picture 5),



Picture 5: Diagram *Communitas* and *Ecclesia* 2.

- f) and various media communities such as on-line communities appeared.
- g) From an integrated community, the Church has turned into a spiritual service provider, and people – the youth, expectant mothers, intellectuals, and so on – bond together with the Church more and more by creating real or virtual communities according to the types of services they need,
- h) and these communities will become the non-exclusive but dominant media of experiencing the transcendental.

Thus the image of the Church will become fragmented and unbalanced even for those living within it. In the wake of the changes, the terminology used in the religious narrative will change as well. Beside the classical formulation stating the Church lives in its congregations, an alternative version appears as a quasi-official concept claiming that the Church lives in its communities. As opposed to the territorial hierarchic organisation consisting of dioceses and districts a web like church model is conceived where the Church is constructed along the various level and a strong set of connections within the communities. At the same time, though these communities are considered by the model as a whole in themselves, as the congregations are construed on the territorial model as churches of full value, the need emerges for occasions when the unity of the web can be showed up. Such a need found a format in the Star point Youth Meeting, organised in the spirit of the models stemming from the first half of the 20th century, which implement a web like model in terms of its logo, organisation and operation,

on this model the unification of the Hungarian Calvinist Churches took place on 22 May in Debrecen.



Picture 6: Star point Youth Meeting logo.

Places of Memory – Just like at Star point, the sacral community, i.e. the administration of the Holy Communion constituted a part of the rite on 22 May. These are usually huge open air ceremonies to which a number of pastors contribute. Unlike the models from the beginning of the 20th century, these pastors do not take the treasures of their own congregation with them, but use pitchers and vessels prepared specifically for the event. The pitcher of the Star point was first completed for the meeting held in 2007 and the ten thousand strong mass could hold in their hands a somewhat re-designed clenodium on 22 May 2009 during the communion. The new pitcher, like the celebration itself, was interpreted as the symbol of a Calvinist identity by not only the designer but the critics as well. This is how it was selected to be part of the exhibits at the exhibition organised in the liturgical space of the Calvinist Big Church of Debrecen. Such uses of objects are relatively rare in liturgical spaces of Calvinist churches, therefore it deserved special attention. The armchair used by Lajos Kossuth, the newly elected Governor on the occasion of the National Assembly held in the Big Church on 14 April declaring the dethronement of the Hapsburg house. Kossuth's chair stood during the decades of Communist rule in the sacral centre of the Church, beside the Lord's Table, referring to one of the key narratives of Calvinist identity awareness, the idea of religion and national freedom (for us coupled since the 17th century due to historical reasons). The pitcher has become a museum piece when put into this environment, but as a result of the place and the

context – it has also become clearly a distinguished place of memory laying the foundations for denominational identity and a symbol of a new element in this identity: unity.

